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I spent the day on Monday, September 20th shadowing a 15-year old sophomore. I chose to shadow a male student because my high school was all female, so I wanted to try and better understand what it is like to be male in high school. For the purpose of this paper, I will call him Scott.

Scott’s first period class is U.S. history, with an emphasis on the historical underpinnings of the U.S. Constitution. While the student is quite bright, he seems not to be paying much attention to the course material. He seems almost entirely focused on the social aspects of his schooling; however, when asked a question, he easily comes up with the correct answer. After observing this, I realize that most of his time (while the teacher is lecturing) is spent looking down at his hands or the desk, making it look as if he’s not listening, but in reality he is paying good attention during lecture. Once the lecture is finished, he resumes conversations with classmates, even when he is supposed to be working independently. When redirected by the classroom teacher, he briefly changes his posture, but soon begins chatting with his friends again. While not terribly disruptive to the classroom atmosphere, this behavior probably frustrates teachers who see much potential for intellectual growth from this student.

His second period class is Spanish 3 (although they are sophomores, they are taking Spanish 3). His Spanish instructor begins class by checking in with her students, asking each of them (in Spanish) what they did over the weekend. She helps them answer by giving them time to think before prompting and helping them conjugate verb forms. Scott does not seem interested in the subject matter, but he is relatively attentive throughout. After their greeting, they begin the day’s lesson. They are reading a short story by Jorge Luis Borges. The story is very short, but still pretty dense. It’s hard for the students to understand, but they seem to be doing their best. Honestly, it seems like the story is a little advanced for them. They don’t quite have the language skills (or the interest in literature for its own sake) that is pretty much requisite for engaging in Borges’s work. Still, the students like their teacher and they remain patient as she enthusiastically guides them through the reading. I walk away from the class feeling like the students understood “what happened” in the story, but that they don’t really care to interpret the meaning of the story for themselves. Scott seems on par with his classmates in this, although his comprehension is above average.

Third period is advanced algebra. First, they receive their test grades (Scott performed well). They’re allowed to look at their tests for a few minutes and they’re invited to re-take it if they are unhappy with their grades. They do not, however, go over the answers as a group. It is up to the students themselves to figure out what they did wrong and to correct themselves or ask for help from the teacher. They then start their next lesson, and the teacher goes over numerous examples to illustrate new concepts. Scott pays close attention during these explanations. Once they begin working independently, he again seems disengaged in the work. He spends this time socializing with his friends. Clearly, this is a very important aspect of school for him.

Fourth period is microbiology, in which they’re studying the spread of disease. They spend the majority of their time in the library researching independently for an infectious disease project. Scott spends the time doing a minimal amount of research and socializing with his friends.

Fifth period is art. This is an elective course (although art itself is not considered an elective at Riverdale, this particular course is an elective art course). In this course, Scott is doing a photography project about water. He has taken numerous (beautiful) pictures of water in different contexts. When he shows me these pictures, he seems quite proud of his work, although he doesn’t seem boastful. When he shows his art teacher some of his pictures, I hear him say “I like the way the sunlight looks in this picture,” which is not a phrase one might expect from a 15-year old boy. This is his favorite class. He is given ample time to work independently, and again he spends much of the time socializing, having already completed most of the work for this assignment.

Scott’s personality and level of intellect are well-suited to the student-directed aspects of Riverdale High School. Even though he doesn’t use all of his work time in class to complete assignments, he doesn’t seem to suffer from it. He gets his work done. His race and class, like those of most of the students in the school, puts him at an advantage. His family assumes that he will go to college; further, his friends also assume the same. The fact that students and their families assume that they will continue their education after high school is probably a big part of the reason that the teachers can so easily abdicate a certain amount of authority; even if students aren’t intrinsically motivated by the work itself, they are motivated to get decent grades so they can go to college. They also demonstrate a high level of respect for authority.

I would worry about his good friend (Keith), who sits next to him in three of his classes. This is a student who is not as engaged, and he could probably use the extra class time to get his assignments started. I doubt that Scott has any concept that his socializing might be hurting Keith (in fact, he probably thinks it is Keith who distracts him and not *vice versa*). If I were the classroom teacher, I might try to have a conversation with Scott about whether he might help get his friend more engaged in the learning process.

Much of the students’ time throughout the day at Riverdale involves independent study or group work. Scott is motivated enough that socializing doesn’t really get in the way of his school work, since he simply completes it at home. I worry about other students who have a bit less motivation than he, since they could easily fall very far behind, especially since socializing is mostly overlooked.

Scott is quite lucky in that his support system, community, and personal characteristics include many of the 40 developmental assets we discussed in High School Learners. His support includes family that expect him not only to finish high school, but to go on to finish college as well. I’m especially impressed with the caring school climate at Riverdale. Although I’m sure there are cliques and some students feel less involved in school and social life than others, for the most part students are very kind to one another. In addition, the school community certainly values youth and my student definitely feels safe, both at home and at school.

One area in which the student is a little less fortunate is in boundaries. While he acts appropriately most of the time, his family doesn’t set clear boundaries, and there are no definitive consequences for “bad” behavior. In addition, his time isn’t always used efficiently. He isn’t involved in a lot of outside activities, but he spends much of his time outside school doing homework. His social competence is quite high. He is very friendly with his peers and has a good rapport with teachers. I was not able to get a sense of his resistance skills, so I’m not sure whether he is able to resist negative peer pressure. Overall, I think this student is likely to grow up to be a successful, well-adjusted adult, and he is served well by his school environment.